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01001101 01000001 01011000 00100000  
01001010 01000101 01001110 01001011  
01001001 01001110 01010011 00100000  
01001001 01010011 00100000 01000001  
01001110 00100000 01000001 01010010  
01010011 01000101 01001000 01001111  
01001100 01000101
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Celia Frost allowed her body to relax just a fraction as she lifted her coat off the peg in the bustling cloakroom. All she had to do now was get to the staffroom, where somebody would be waiting to give her a lift home. Usually she cringed at having members of staff ferry her to and from school, but today Celia couldn't wait to get into the safety of a teacher's car.

She dared to believe that she'd survived the day. Maybe he wasn't going to come after her. Maybe now he realized that she wasn't going to be one of his victims any more. Maybe, just maybe, he felt a grudging respect for what she'd done. Of course she'd been careful; getting out of the

classroom quickly, making sure that she wasn't alone, doing her best to melt into the crowd. Although for Celia, being inconspicuous was never easy.

At almost fifteen, her increasingly gangling body showed no inclination to curve or protrude. She habitually walked with an apologetic stoop, and from her bowed head sprang a mass of untameable orange hair. From a distance, her sliver of a face, with its oversized features, looked like it was engulfed in a tangerine cloud.

However, it wasn't just her appearance and her gloved hands that made Celia a curiosity. She'd decided long ago that Mother Nature was nothing but a cruel old hag who'd ensured that she was in a league of her own when it came to "standing out". After all, not many pupils starting a new school get an assembly dedicated to them. And unfortunately for Celia, each "new start" was worse than the last, as she became more self-conscious and her peers less tolerant.

Six months ago Mr. Powell, her latest headmaster, had done his best, but it had still been excruciating as he'd addressed the packed hall about "Celia's special condition". She'd longed for the ground to open and swallow her up, as the eyes of every pupil turned on her. She'd slouched down in her chair, staring fixedly at the floor, as the

intense heat of embarrassment rose from deep inside her and flooded her chalk-white face, turning it scarlet. The girls on either side of her had instinctively leaned away and the air filled with exclamation marks as the hall had erupted with voices.

“Oh my God, that is *sooo* terrible!”

“It makes me feel ill just thinking about it!”

“She should be in a special school, it’s not right to have her with normal people!”

“What if you bump into her by accident? I’m not getting done for killing her!”

“Well I’d rather die than live like that!”

The headmaster had struggled to quieten down the assembly. He’d warned them that anyone not showing the necessary care and consideration around Celia would be severely punished, but all Celia had tuned into was the hushed chants coming from behind her, led by Max Jenkins.

“Freaky Frost! Freaky Frost! Freaky Frost!”

She was annoyed with herself for even letting it register. After all, it wasn’t very original. She’d heard it before, in all the other schools that she’d passed through.

At least in the other schools she’d always managed to find a couple of girls who would let her sit with them at breaks. She was under no illusions – they’d never been her friends; they’d regarded her as a charity case and they

didn't seem to be aware of how torturous it was, having to listen to them making plans to meet up after school and never being invited. Celia didn't blame them – why should anyone hang around with a liability like her? But at this latest school in Wales things were much worse. Jenkins had made sure of that.

Celia had soon discovered that Max Jenkins was more vicious, more toxic, than anyone she'd ever encountered. No one was safe from him. He fed off people's fear and operated with impunity throughout the school and, unfortunately for Celia, ever since that first assembly, he'd decided to make her his special project. He let it be known that anyone thinking of befriending her would be dealt with and for the last six months he'd revelled in watching his isolated, passive victim being ground down by his taunts and threats. Jenkins had a knack for homing in on people's weaknesses and strengths and then using both to his advantage. Therefore, as soon as he noticed all the A grades Celia was getting, he started delegating his homework to her.

It was unthinkable that Celia would ever fight back. Janice's words were ingrained in her: "You're not like other people. You must never do anything where you might get injured."

Everything Celia did, every decision she made, was dictated by this rule. In school this meant that she was

excused from PE, DT, food tech and any other activity that was deemed a potential threat. At home this meant endless, lonely hours confined to the house by Janice; tormented by being able to witness the hustle and bustle of life but never being able to join in.

Celia felt like she lived her life trapped in a gloomy bubble, a gripping fear sealed in there with her. It was exhausting trying to fight off the gloom as it seeped into her mind, leaching out all the light. But she couldn't let it take hold of her; after all, how could Janice cope if Celia stopped coping?

Throughout her life this fear of injury had always overridden any other desire; until, that was, last week, when Max Jenkins had walked out of their maths class and thrown his homework book at her saying, "You'd better make it a good one."

As she'd stood there, with his book in her hands, Celia was suddenly overwhelmed by temptation.

Use binary numbers to write a coded message.

Oh yes, she'd grinned to herself. I've got the perfect message for you, Jenkins.

So it had been earlier that day that thirty-five pupils had sat in their maths lesson, yawning and lolling their heads on their desks, having already decoded seven dull binary

messages, when they got to Max Jenkins's effort.

"Now, Mr. Jenkins, let's see what pearl you've come up with," said the uninspired maths teacher.

He wrote the digits on the board and, to chivvy them along, he made one of the boys come up and write each decoded letter in large capitals under its corresponding numbers. He chose pupils at random to work out each letter, and at first their droning voices were barely audible.

"Yes, come on, come on. Look at what we've got so far. *Max Jenkins is an...*" The teacher paused, looking concerned. "Now, Mr. Jenkins, this had better not be anything offensive. Is it offensive, Mr. Jenkins?"

By now, Jenkins was shifting in his chair, looking increasingly uncomfortable. "Course not. No one would be so stupid as to write something that would get them into *really, really* big trouble," he said, glowering at Celia. She turned her head defiantly to face him, revealing just a trace of a smile. At this, Jenkins started to panic. "I don't want mine read out," he shouted. "I haven't finished it. It's not very good... I can do better."

"Well I never, Max. It's not like you to be bashful. Now I *am* intrigued. Let's continue," said the teacher, gesturing to his scribe.

But now, instead of having to prise the answers out of the half-asleep class, it seemed that everyone was wide

awake and furiously trying to be first to crack the code.

The letters came rattling out from the animated pupils faster than the teacher could stop them and before he knew it, there on the board, in large bold capitals for everyone to see, was:

01001101	01000001	01011000	00100000	01001010
M	A	X		J
01000101	01001110	01001011	01001001	01001110
E	N	K	I	N
01010011	00100000	01001001	01010011	00100000
S		I	S	
01000001	01001110	00100000	01000001	01010010
A	N		A	R
01010011	01000101	01001000	01001111	01001100
S	E	H	O	L
01000101				
E				

A communal gasp of disbelief was immediately followed by the first nervous titter, which was followed by another, then another, until the whole classroom exploded into laughter. Hysteria overpowered their fear; tears rolled down contorted faces, bodies bent double with laughter and others, too giddy to speak, pointed from the words on the board to the silently seething boy. Even the dour maths teacher, who knew Jenkins's malicious nature only too well, could not suppress a smirk as he shouted over the

uproarious class, “Mr. Jenkins! What a very peculiar thing to write about yourself!”

The whole school soon heard what had happened in the maths class and, for the first time since Celia had arrived, people weren't trying to avoid her eye, but actually acknowledged her in the corridor with approving nods and secret smiles. However, everyone knew that there would be a terrible price to pay for what she'd done. Celia knew this too, but the planning and execution of her revenge had stirred a potent mixture of excitement and dread in her that pressed dangerously against the sides of her invisible prison. It had all seemed worth it just to see Jenkins's face puce with rage, as humiliation and laughter threatened his reign of terror.

Suddenly there was a flurry of activity in the cloakroom, as pupils scattered like a shoal of fish when a great white suddenly cuts through the dark waters. Celia kept her back to the exodus and continued zipping up her bag that was on the bench. Her mind was racing, desperately trying to work out her next move.

“Hey, Frost, you freak!”

She could feel him moving in on her. The fumes from his paint-stripper aftershave clogged up the air.

Celia was aware of her body beginning to tremble. *Don't show fear. Don't show fear*, she repeated over and over

in her head. She knew that any sign of distress would only excite a sadist like Jenkins. She steadied herself and turned to face him. The room was now completely empty apart from her and her tormentor.

Max Jenkins was tall and powerfully built, but once Celia straightened up her shoulders, she stood level with him. She met his stare, trying to appear unperturbed, but her owl-round eyes, framed by a thicket of lashes, always made her look slightly startled. She convinced herself that someone would have gone to get a teacher, so she decided that she just had to keep him calm and at bay until help arrived.

“You think you can do that to me?” His voice was a low rumble; a volcano on the verge of erupting. “What you did wasn’t very nice, was it? You’ve hurt my feelings. People can’t seem to appreciate this, but I’m a very sensitive person. I’m just misunderstood.” He cocked his head to one side and pouted mockingly.

“Yeah. I’m sure Hitler felt the same,” she blurted out, regretting the words as soon as they left her mouth. But Jenkins only gave a hollow laugh.

“Well, Freaky, aren’t you full of surprises? First your little stunt in class and now an attempt at sarcasm. You obviously don’t take me seriously. Perhaps I’ve been too kind to you – but I’m about to put that right. You see, you’ve given me no choice. I now have a duty to teach you

a lesson. I have a reputation to maintain. People have got to be shown that anyone who takes me on will be punished. So I've been wondering what would really make an impression on you."

He paused and put his forefinger and middle finger together. He pressed them against the base of her neck, before moving them lingeringly up her face, tracing them over her sharp chin, across her thick gash of a mouth and climbing along her broad nose. They came to rest in the middle of her forehead, where Jenkins flicked up his thumb to form a gun and said, in a slow, deep whisper, "Bang! Bang!"

Celia blinked as his fingers jabbed into her forehead, her flesh crawling, but she remained composed. Her lack of response disappointed him, but he was far from finished.

"I've decided that your punishment should benefit the whole school. You must know that we've all been dying to see what would happen if your freaky body got sliced."

At these words, panic shot through her. She pushed past him. "You're going to let me go now. I'm going to walk out of here and I promise not to tell anyone what you've just said, okay?" she said firmly.

But as she quickened her pace towards the door, he grabbed her and dragged her back, pinning her against the coat rack.

“Get off me. You’ve had your fun,” she shouted, struggling against the weight of his leaning body.

“Who said anything about fun? I’m undertaking a serious scientific experiment here, but, of course, to do that I need my implements.” With this, he reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a small, red-handled penknife. She recoiled as Jenkins prised out the shiny, silver blade and without warning sliced it across his thumb. He winced as blood immediately sprang from the short, narrow cut.

“Surprisingly that hurt more than you’d think,” he said coolly, as he sucked the blood from his thumb. Then he answered Celia’s open-mouthed stare. “I wanted to demonstrate to you just how sharp my blade is,” he said leeringly. “And now it’s your turn!”

He gripped Celia’s left wrist and yanked at the cuff of her blouse, causing the button to fly off. He pulled up the sleeve roughly, exposing Celia’s long, translucent arm, her vivid veins like blue water running under a thin layer of ice.

“Don’t do it, Max,” she said softly, but the beads of sweat springing from her pores belied her outer calmness. “Just let me go.”

He erupted, bawling in her face, the veins on his neck bulging. “Do you really think I’m going to let you go?! People were laughing at me because of you. You freak!”

“Just think about it.” She fought the tremor in her voice. “Say I bleed to death? You’ll spend years banged up in prison. It’s not worth it, is it, Max? It’s not too late. You can walk away from this right now.”

But Jenkins responded by seizing her elbow and positioning the knife so it hovered over her upper arm.

“What do you think?” he taunted her. “Should I do it, should I?”

She daren’t move, she daren’t breathe.

Suddenly quick, urgent footsteps could be heard coming down the corridor.

Teachers, she thought with blissful relief. *The teachers are here!*

The cloakroom door flew open. The teachers froze at the sight that faced them, with only seconds to decide what to do next. Jenkins panicked, tightening his hold on her elbow.

Oh God, he’s going to do it! I’ve got to do something!

She jerked her arm out of his grip. There was a flash of silver, and a searing, white-hot pain as the blade sliced along her paper skin. She heard a short, high-pitched scream puncture the air – it was coming from her!